

recorded

by R. Denton Williams

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My name is Pierre Jean d'Huac, and I was born in the Chinese town of Cholon at the end of August 1922, though it was not until my nineteenth birthday that I took very much interest in anything but my purely personal affairs.

There were, in our part of Cholon, a number of Japanese residents, quite a few of whom had a working knowledge of both the French and Annamite tongues.

One of these people lived in a house just opposite mine, and I was friendly with his two sons named Yoshi and Hori. The family name was Murata. 村田

I was particularly friendly with Hori, and whenever we had the opportunity we used to take a tramride into the big neighbouring French city of Saigon. We never paid a fare because we were also friends of the tram conductor.

It was in the summer of 1940 that I first heard of the Japanese plans for occupying French Indo-China. France had just fallen to the Germans and the French Commander-in-Chief in Indo-China was known to be very sympathetic to the Vichy regime.

The Japanese community in the twin cities of Saigon-Cholon must have numbered about 5000, and suddenly the word went round that the Japanese Foreign Minister was arranging to send garrison troops to Indo-China in order to forestall any trouble and to protect the people from warlike threats which, it was said, were to be expected from Britain or America, or from one or other of the Liberation armies which were at the disposal of the British

Government, or from the many European refugees who were building action groups in the United States and were planning to come back and free their countries from the axis forces.

The same week, Hori and I were walking down the Rue Catinat in Saigon and were on the point of turning down a side street in order to work our way back to the dock area, when we were drawn aside to a public meeting at the main entrance to the Hotel Continental. Speakers were advocating the creation of a free Indo-China movement to take over the responsibilities of the Government from a destroyed and dying France.

What was surprising was the presence of quite a group of Frenchmen who were applauding all these ideas.

Before we could move away from this gathering, we had agreed to sign our names to a register which was being prepared by a group called the Vietminh, and which was collecting signatures from any persons who would be willing to support a new political party designed to save the country from a sell-out to the Japanese.

My friend Hori did not disclose the fact that he was a Japanese citizen but also signed with me.

Upon our return home, we discovered that Hori's father had left town without any warning, in order to attend a very important meeting of his compatriots at the seaside town of Cap St Jacques, about forty miles down river from Saigon.

Soon rumours were rife that the Japanese fleet would be arriving and preparations were being made to billet Nippon soldiers. Each Japanese family was asked to receive as many soldiers into it as there were members of the family.

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This meant that the Murata family were expected to make food for five soldiers - there being two sons, an adopted daughter and the father and mother.

Old Murata himself became busier than ever, because he ran a small vegetable business under the name of Bambu Brothers and it was evident that he would be called upon to supply the Japanese forces with fresh produce from the day that they arrived.

For Nipponese troops, the most essential thing is a well-balanced diet containing a regular amount of fresh vegetables and rice bran to safeguard them against beri-beri, which was apparently the main threat to their health.

For six months these preparations went on, not in any clandestine fashion, but quite openly. Then, all at once things began to happen.

First the French commander, Admiral Decoux made an official pronouncement, which was broadcast over Saigon radio and published prominently in the press.

He declared that French Indo-China could not be expected to survive alone in a hostile world and that therefore after careful consideration he had decided to invite the soldiers of Nippon to come and protect the country.

'Furthermore,' he said, 'we must develop our trade to the mutual advantage of our two great people', and consequently, he had decided that the best possible way to do this would be for Indo-China to be made a full member of the Co-Prosperity Sphere of Greater South-East Asia. Thus, overnight, the ancient and glorious land of my fathers had been sold out to a foreign race.

I immediately went and found Hori and told him the news which I had heard over Saigon radio. He already knew all about it, as that morning the first party of Japanese had arrived at Saigon by air from Japan and were now staying at the Governor General's Palace.

As had been planned, the Japanese would be sending troops to garrison all the big coastal towns of the country, and the first battalion was arriving on the Yokohama Maru due off Cap St Jacques in a matter of days.

My ~~reaction~~ reaction to this sudden turn of events was to seek out some Chinese friends who ran a fleet of river sampans and had control of most of the traffic by canal from Cholon to the Mekong River System.

I knew that if there was to be a resistance movement, then it would have created some secure bases in the comparative peace and remoteness of Cambodia, and I felt that the old Chinese river traders would be the people to have most information on ~~ix~~ the matter.

True enough, I was directed from one Chinese trader to another, until eventually I was given an Annamite pass to enter a restricted area at Mytho in southern Cochin-China.

I told Hori about this and he said that he would come with me, notwithstanding his nationality. He said that he could easily pass as an Annamite, having been born in the country and ~~apexik~~ speaking the monosyllabic language like a native.

It was a very wet day, raining cats and dogs, when we went down to the canal and embarked on a small river boat to start our journey. In the back of the boat we were given seats, and

to our surprise we found ourselves talking to a Frenchman.

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His name was also Pierre and it turned out that he was a Free French supporter of General de Gaulle and had decided to go into hiding until the day when he could return to Saigon and oust the foolish Vichy Government which was now hand in glove with the Japanese. As a measure of his good faith he had brought with him 5000 piastres which represented his life's savings apart from a house which he owned and had left behind. He had been a senior man working in a shipyard in Saigon.

At Mytho we were met by two young Annamite girls, who could do nothing else but speak about the coming revolution. They spent fully quarter of an hour telling us about this before we were able to gain any practical instructions from them.

Horl, whose name we had changed to Hong Than was not recognized as a Japanese, and we were allowed to remain together for the next part of our journey which led us into the delta region of the Mekong river system.

It took us two days of meandering in small boats to locate our destination - a well-constructed fishing camp more or less hidden by very tall grass which almost encircled it.

Not only was this fishing village in touch with events throughout Souther Indo-China, but it was also in radio communication with friends further north along the coast of Annam, and through them with other friends in the Red Delta region of Tonkin. The equipment was of American manufacture and had been purchased through agents in Bangkok, from where it had been brought overland via Battambang and ^{PHNOM-PENH.} ~~Phnom-penh.~~

This little fishing camp hidden away amongst the tall

grasses which cover so much of the Mekong delta region, was to be my home for four years, during which time I helped develop a country-wide intelligence system, using as contacts in the main towns people of all nationalities. In Hanoi, I had two Chinese working for me, in Hue, an old Siamese trader, and in Saigon mostly Annamites, though there was one invaluable contact who was a French Government official.

We sent messages to all parts of Eastern Indo-China, the area better known as Vietnam, to points all over Cochinchina, to Cambodia and to Laos. In Tonkin, our two Chinese friends developed their headquarters in the centre of Hanoi, and kept daily contact with Vietminh workers who would concentrate on the mining and cement workers close to the port of Haiphong.

I made only one trip away from the little fishing camp during these four years, when in the summer of 1944, I travelled to the hill resort of Dalat, north-east of Saigon, and the French summer capital, in order to negotiate with two Japanese officers on the staff of Field Marshal Count Terauchi, the Japanese Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Regions (which included the South-west Pacific theatres of war, Malaya and Burma).

This trip I made quite openly, escorted by the Japanese from Mytho onwards, as I was their guest and could rely upon them to protect me. The Japanese were anxious to find out how well organized the Vietminh was, and to see if they could take over the Saigon Government from the French if necessary.

In March 1945, there occurred just the kind of event which we had desired, when some Free French sailors and airmen who had been interned in Saigon staged a premature revolt against

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7.

the Japanese and against the Vichy Government. This revolt was very quickly dealt with by the Japanese army, and all the French residents (almost twenty thousand) in Southern Indo-China were confined to one or two residential areas, and the French (Vichy) Government was deposed. *And a United group of Annamites under Bao Dai (but not including the Vietminh as such)* received an invitation to form a government at once, and this was done successfully within two days. A shadow cabinet was in any case already in existence and full plans had long since been made for just this eventuality.

To our dismay, we soon discovered that the Vichy French had sold almost every major asset which was in Indo-China to the Japanese. The latter, in turn, had simply taken possession of the currency printing machines and at a place called Ben Cat, north of Saigon, they had proceeded to print as many 500 piastre notes as they required. No one except the French had anything worth selling, so that all these piastres came into the hands of the French, at least initially. The French even sold things which were not their own to sell, such as the big Shell fuel and installations down the Saigon River, subsequently bombed by American Liberator bombers.

Consequently when inflation enveloped everything, the French did not suffer unduly as they had ample piastres to keep pace with rising prices, but not so the Chinese and Annamites who suffered immensely. There were, of course some exceptions, particularly among the wealthy Chinese business community in Cholon (there were nearly ^{two} ~~three~~ hundred thousand Chinese in Cholon at the time), some of whom accumulated great fortunes from operations in the black market. They usually

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 invaded and looted the French property, which the French were eventually glad to sell in exchange for a guaranteed food supply.

In Saigon, we took over the Palais de Justice, and the minor courts and ran them tolerably well; we occupied the dock area, and successfully ran the Cold Storage and the port transport in addition to all the other municipal duties, such as the operation of the power house, the ~~xxxx~~ running of the Postal Services (we printed our own liberation stamps) and the sanitary services. We carried out all these tasks efficiently, and even attended to the repair of some of the roads, *and renamed many of them.*

We managed to restore a measure of public transport, getting some old trams to work, and improved the food supply immeasurably, as we had the confidence of all the country peoples, who again resumed shipments of rice, fresh vegetables and fish in large enough quantities to feed every community. The total population was ~~certainly in excess of~~ ^{very nearly} half a million, quite apart from the Japanese and their war prisoners, who probably totalled another hundred thousand between them.

We noticed that the Japanese were still relying upon Bambu Brothers for their ^{fresh} food supplies, and a roaring business they had built up in the intervening years. Old man Murata had been enlisted into the Japanese army on the Commissariat side, and his son Yoshi had taken control of a mixed unit of transport, mostly old vehicles brought from Japan - Nissan and Toyoda trucks, of the type with collapsible sides, and often kept going through the cannibalizing of English, American and French vehicles which had been captured in one or other part of South-east Asia.

Hong Than (Hori) was sent up to Hanoi, so that the chance of his being recognized would be avoided. *At a week after Hiroshima's*
dropping the government from Bao Dai and
by the beginning of September 1945 when we knew that the
free nations of the world would be coming to disarm the Japanese and send them back to the land of the Rising Sun, we felt ourselves to be well in the saddle of government, and we were full of hope for a bright future, having managed to survive the tricky period immediately following upon the collapse of Japan.

We learnt from our radio that the British Commander in Burma would be sending a division of Indian troops to occupy our country. This seemed to be the best possible news as we all had a pretty good notion of the Indian position and we were convinced that any country which was going itself to become self-governing after a long period of tutelage would never hinder the march of freedom in ^a ~~the~~ neighbouring land in very similar circumstances.

Accordingly, when the first Gurkha troops arrived in Saigon by air, we welcomed them as fellow liberators. We arranged for the population to line the streets from the airport to the Cathedral Square. Everyone carried flags (not tricolours) and banners proclaiming in English their welcome to the Liberators from Tyranny, to the Fighters for Freedom and to the Indians and the British and to the Americans, who had won the war for the liberty of nations great and small.

But most banners had a little note at the bottom which read 'We have no room for the French' or words to that effect.

We were told that the terms of reference of the Allied Troops, at that time under the command of a British Brigadier,

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were, firstly, to maintain law and order, and secondly, to
and concentrate
disarm/the Japanese surrendered personnel prior to making
arrangements for their transference back to Japan.

Seven luxury bungalows belonging to a wealthy Chinese millionaire and his six sons were placed at the disposal of the Indian troops - all forerunners of the main body which was coming more slowly by sea.

These troops were a part of the 20th Indian Division, which had had a very fine record in Burma, having among 'st other things battered the Japanese 2nd Division, the remnants of which were at ~~the~~ this time stationed in Saigon. We trusted this division to maintain law and order and to clear the country of Japanese and other foreigners.

For a few days, all seemed to be going very well, at least in Southern Indo-China. In the North, word came from Hanoi that the Chinese (Nationalists) were occupying the whole of Tonkin. There was also no trouble there.

However, we were informed privately that the ~~the~~ French ~~internees~~ internees were pressing the British Brigade Commander for arms and ammunition, in order 'to protect themselves adequately from possible terrorist action', so they said. After considerable debate about making an issue of weapons to civilian/^{ex-}internees and not without some doubt, it appeared that the Brigade Commander agreed to ~~xxxxx~~ to give these Frenchmen a few rifles and a small quantity of ammunition, simply as a protective measure. The strongest point in favour of this policy, was, apparently, the realization that the maintenance of law and order mainly rested (indeed, almost entirely rested upon the

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then unproven
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It was felt that a few armed Frenchmen might be useful if any trouble did arise.

Meanwhile, the Annamite Government carried on with its duties in full cooperation with the Allied troops and quite competently.

On a Sunday in the last week of September 1945, I was with a colleague, sitting on a verandah opposite the main entrance to the Palais de Justice when I heard a shout from the watchman, followed by several shots. I ran out into the courtyard and was met by a stream of abuse from two ~~bearded~~ bearded Frenchmen in a state of great animation.

At the point of a rifle I stood helplessly by, while another Frenchman hoisted the Tricolour Flag to the roof over the Palais de Justice.

Similar events took place at all the other major buildings of the town, and the Tricolour was seen in the morning to be flying high over the Governor General's Palace, over the General Post Office, and over many other Government and Business premises. It was a concerted insurrection by the Vichy French & ex-internees against the ~~then~~ existing lawful government.

We did not fight back at this time, in order to avoid unnecessary deaths, and because we were sure that the British Commander would not tolerate such unilateral action as this, and would restore our authority, if not, the next day, at least ^{surprise} as soon as they had full knowledge of the action.

There followed about ten days of meetings in the British Brigade Headquarters.

This headquarters was still ensconced in the Chinese

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millionaire's bungalows (they were in fact three storey buildings) and our meetings were held against a backcloth of the Union Jack.

We still had faith that the British would not let us down, despite the fact that their policy towards India was not yet clarified. Had we not been told that they would maintain law and order? And was not this a breach of the peace which they were responsible ~~at~~ for restoring? Were they not in all probability going to grant India her independence, and were not these troops entirely (but for most of the officers and a few British other ranks) Indian?

But our hopes were not as well founded as we had thought, and finally we declined to continue with the negotiations until it was clearly recognized that we were in fact the lawful government of Indo-China, and that if the French wished to stay, then they would have to negotiate with us after, but not before, relinquishing their hold on the main public buildings.

Several British officers of the British army told us that they would have liked to have supported us, but that their instructions from the British Foreign Office were to the effect that they should assist the French to regain control in Indo-China.

This decision was reported to have resulted from a private agreement between the British Foreign Minister and the ~~French~~ ~~Foreign~~ ~~Office~~ ~~Quai d'Orsay~~, whereby the British had agreed to support the French in Indo-China, so long as the the French gave up any hopes they might be entertaining of a return to Syria and Lebanon.

Concurrently, the British would use their good offices in Chungking, to influence Chiang Kai-Shek to withdraw his troops

from Northern Indo-China, where the French feared that he had ideas of remaining indefinitely, having regard to the advantage of controlling Haiphong port as an outlet for the Yunnan railway.

We called this the secret Treaty of Paris, but it was no laughing matter for our freedom movement. What had happened, in fact, was that the British Indian troops, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps intentionally, had formed a bridgehead for the French, who would now find it fairly easy to land a new expeditionary force in the country, and so reconquer the plum of their empire.

Insurrection.

What had begun as a liberation movement was now turned into a case of insurrection, and the world was informed accordingly by the French.

The month of October 1945 saw tragedy sweep the land. Our nationalist movement was suppressed ruthlessly by the Allied forces, most of whom were Indian at this time, and by, of all people, the Japanese army.

Instead of disarming the Japanese surrendered personnel and concentrating them into a small area ready for movement by sea back to Japan, they were now rearmed and deployed against the Annamites.

In some cases they were issued with British three inch mortars, which the Japanese had themselves captured in Malaya in 1941.

The Japanese, several battalions of them were moved to strategic points in the defence perimeter established around the twin cities of Saigon-Cholon.

Japanese battalions defeated several major attacks by our Vietminh forces, meanwhile French troops were brought into

the bridgehead, aboard French and British ships.

Or were they French troops? Several deserters joined us towards the end of 1945, and they were Germans who had been captured in the Western Desert, and, no questions asked, had enlisted into the French Foreign Legion. Their officers were Frenchmen, trained at St Cyr, but few of the men were French, so these deserters informed us.

We used to be on friendly terms with a Socialist editor in Saigon. One day, German troops took his three girl typists away, stripped them naked and hauled them around Cholon on the back of a lorry, for all the world to ridicule.

Often at night, these Foreign Legionaries would fire automatic weapons into the top stories of the main buildings, simply out of sheer joy and merriment.

One group of French troops which arrived in Saigon built up a reputation for general misbehaviour and there were instances of atrocities.

Several authentic cases of wounded prisoners being bayonneted were reported to our command.

~~The newspaper correspondents, one of the Paris~~

In Cholon, whenever atrocities were committed by the French or Foreign Legion, the Annamites would retaliate by throwing grenades at groups of French civilians. This led to the practice of enclosing all transport with wire netting.

Grenade throwing and atrocities on a small scale became commonplace occurrences.

Two newspaper correspondents, one of a Paris paper and the other of an Australian paper, were imprisoned by General Le Clero, then after release on the instructions of French Indo-China Governor General, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, they were sent out of the country post haste, because they had seen some of these atrocities and their aftermath and were declared to be hostile to the French cause.

Saigon was in fact besieged, and at least during the hours of darkness, no European or Indian troops could move safely.

During November and December 1945, efforts were made by the defenders to push out into the countryside and to assist with this, several American Army Landing Craft (lst) were brought into use-being particularly valuable on the inland waterways.

We made several serious mistakes, chiefly through trying to fight pitched battles against the much superior fire power of the defenders, but we never lost the moral support of the Annamite and Chinese population.

Meanwhile, the most serious thing which happened was the devaluation of the piastre. On the face of it this was a reasonable step for the French to take. They devalued all five hundred piastre notes by 40%, but only those notes printed in Indo-China; notes printed in France were not affected. As was sensible, they announced the devaluation to the general public on a Saturday afternoon, when the banks had closed for the week-end, ~~but~~ ~~the~~ ~~rich~~ ~~and~~ ~~wealthy~~ ~~Chinese~~ ~~were~~ ~~informed~~ ~~on~~ ~~the~~ ~~Friday~~ ~~steps~~ ~~were~~ ~~concerning~~ ~~their~~ ~~interests~~. Deposits in the bank were not affected.

CPYRGHT

16

Carried out
 This move was ~~made~~ by the new French administrator, a man named Cedille, who thereby became particularly unpopular with those Free French and Ammanites (and some Chinese too) who had never trusted the banking system during the Japanese occupation, but had kept their savings in old hiding places, such as the proverbial stocking. One of the reactions of this move was a strike of the Chinese boatmen along the canals.

Meanwhile, the British Indian Army troops were gradually handing over their duties to the incoming French and Foreign Legion men.

However, they had saved Saigon for the return of a French Government, and they had also saved Saigon from starvation through the development of some interesting systems of supply. For example, they brought fresh fish into the town by canal. The fish were kept alive in the flooded bottoms of the barges. These purchases were made possible through the operation of a clever Chinese millionaire, who, once a week, was flown into Phnom-penh by a Japanese pilot of the Kamikaze squadron. He carried a large sum of money with which to pay the Cambodian merchants for goods to be shipped to Saigon by canal. *the Mekong River and the Dufferre* We allowed these cargoes to go through, as they were *guarded* ~~conveyed~~ by Japanese *Soldiers.* ~~crews~~

We were not sufficiently au fait with the true position to know whether or not Japanese parties were for or against us, and as they had only been deployed against us on limited sectors it was not always clear whether or not they should be given freedom to pass through our barriers. On the canals they had the benefit of our doubts.

We were highly amused to learn from our agents in Saigon that the French troops arrived without so much as a day's landing rations, but they made up for this by landing a ship load of red Algerian wine, which they then tried to barter with the British.

Such food, ~~mostly earned~~, as was given to the French forces by the British, invariably found its way into the black market, which flourished in the besieged area of Saigon.

Unfortunately, we soon discovered that the French did not plan to rely on any ration system but to live off the land, from which they seized livestock and poultry, and even dug up sweet potatoes, and other vegetables.

At the same time, the British were making great efforts to withdraw from their commitments, as if realising that they had perhaps unwittingly become involved in an unwanted colonial war, so distasteful to the new British Labour Government.

The French troops were at first ill-disciplined and ill-equipped - their problems were aggravated by such incidents as the destruction of their main petrol depot in the Central Park, in a fire which was purely accidental.

But soon the French appeared on the battle front with better equipment and weapons - ironically this was found to be lend-lease material from America. We had always counted upon the help and sympathy of the Americans.

Had not the Americans given the Philippines complete independence after the war?

The policy of General Le Clerc was to reconquer the country, with little thought to the destruction which his methods brought in

Whole towns and villages were razed to the ground, and the people lived in terror of their lives.

The French troops were even equipped with lend-lease Dodge trucks and green jungle uniforms, left behind by the British.

Thus it was that I and my colleagues became 'rebels' and thus it is that we will continue to sacrifice our comforts and our lives for a cause which we believe to be just. If there is any justice left in the world today, then we shall be heard fairly in the end.

Our neighbours are all independent - Thailand to the immediate West, which country has never known what it is to be under colonial rule. Burma also to the West, a country which is now utterly free from colonial rule. To the East lie the Philippine Islands which have become free, and not so far away to the South is Indonesia which is now a free country. While to the North, the Colonial Powers renounced their extra territorial rights in China.

Are we alone to be kept under the subjugation of a nation which sold us to the Japanese? Are we to be content with the status of a puppet regime?

Did the Indians remain satisfied with the suggestion that they should have a semi-independent status under the ostensible rule of the Maharajahs? Then why Bao Dai?

You will say that many of us are Communists, that is so, but our people have lived for generations in communal groups whose produce did not go to enrich the individual but for the benefit of the entire community, usually a village. What examples of capitalism have the people seen in recent years? They have seen Chinese aliens making fortunes out of the black market, and from

the Japanese. ~~They have seen men like Cedille deprive honest and~~
~~simple soldiers of 40% of his life's savings, while great French~~
~~businessmen lost nothing. Is that fair~~

Now, all eyes are upon our country, and so they should be, to warn the world of wrongs perpetrated and wrongs which can be done to any nation, whether great or small, if the propaganda and censor machines are formidable enough.

Almost any issue can be clouded by these means, and the world will have to pay for it - if necessary by more years of war and death and destruction.

You might think we are mortal enemies of the French - not so, we are great admirers of many things from and of France, and we have many Frenchmen who are in sympathy with our cause.

One day, the truth will out, it has a way of doing so, and if this short account is the small opening upon that truth then it will have been justified.

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